

Rock Firefinch *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis* in the Mandara Mountains, north-east Nigeria: a new subspecies?

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L'Amarante des rochers *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis* dans les Monts Mandara, Nigeria du sud-est : une nouvelle sous-espèce ? Nous fournissons une description d'un mâle et d'une femelle, ainsi que des photos d'un mâle, d'un amarante capturé dans les Monts Mandara, au nord-est du Nigeria. Le plumage et le cri de cet amarante sont identiques à ceux de l'Amarante des rochers *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis*, une espèce précédemment rapportée de la zone, excepté que le mâle n'a pas la couronne grise typique de l'espèce. Des travaux supplémentaires sur le terrain sont nécessaires pour déterminer s'il agit d'un individu aberrant ou d'une population de l'Amarante des rochers morphologiquement distincte.

Rock Firefinch *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis* was recently described from the Jos Plateau, central Nigeria (10°32'N 09°21'E), by Payne (1998). Sightings were also reported from the Mandara Mountains (11°02'N 13°44'E), c.500 km to the east (see Payne 1998, Borrow & Demey 2001, Fry & Keith 2004). In 2005, the species was discovered in the Maroua area, northern Cameroon, c.80 km south-east of the Mandara Mountains (N. Borrow in *Bull. ABC* 12: 179). Since then there have been several additional sightings from northern Cameroon, where the species is thought to be a locally common resident (Mills 2010).

To gather more data on this species in the Mandara Mountains, we visited this area on 9 October 2008. On the first day, we searched for an access from the main road into the mountains. While we passed through some farmland with gallery forest, a pair of firefinches, calling like Rock Firefinches, flew over. They landed in a tree c.10 m away and eventually flew down to a stream, permitting good views. The male had a deep red head, breast and belly, brown wings and a grey bill. The male Rock Firefinch from the Jos Plateau, with which we are familiar, has a brownish-grey crown, a brownish-red back, a deep red rump, and a black tail with red fringes to the outer rectrices. The face down to the throat, breast and belly is deep red, and the wings are dark reddish brown. Other male firefinches with red heads are Red-billed Firefinch *L. senegala*, which has a red or pink, not grey, bill, and Black-bellied Firefinch *L. rara*, which has a black, not red, belly. The female, observed at a distance of c.15 m, had a brownish-grey head, brown wings and a grey bill, i.e. similar to female Rock Firefinch from



Figures 1–2. Adult male Rock Firefinch *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis*, Jos Plateau, 27 September 2004 (Martin Stervander)

Amarante des rochers *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis* mâle adulte, Plateau de Jos, 27 septembre 2004 (Martin Stervander)



Figures 3–4. Adult male Rock Firefinch *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis*, Gwoza, Mandara Mountains, 11 October 2008 (Keith Larson)

Amarante des rochers *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis* mâle adulte, Gwoza, Monts Mandara, 11 octobre 2008 (Keith Larson)

the Jos Plateau. The location was in a riparian corridor through farmland converted from Guinea savannah, at c.500 m altitude.

Next day, we erected mist-nets at the site and, after two hours, trapped a male. Its plumage was similar to that of a typical male Rock Firefinch, except that it lacked the grey crown (Figs. 1–4). In the hand, some small grey feathers on the crown were visible, but the overall impression was red, especially when seen at a distance. The red also seemed to have a different shade, slightly paler and less deep, than that of Rock Firefinch from the Jos Plateau. Wing length was 55 mm and weight 10.9 g, i.e. within the range of the Jos Plateau birds.

On the Jos Plateau, Rock Firefinch is usually associated, as its name implies, with rocky habitats (Wright & Jones 2005; pers. obs.), at altitudes ranging from 750 m at Kagoro to 1,350 m at Jos (Abalaka & Jones in prep.); in northern Cameroon it has been recorded at 300–430 m (M. Mills in litt. 2009).

The population in the Mandara Mountains and neighbouring areas of Cameroon (pers. obs.)

may differ from Rock Firefinch described from the Jos Plateau, although further investigation is needed to reveal whether these differences are consistent and warrant formal description as a new taxon.

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